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**LETTING IN THE NIGHT: THE MOON, THE MADWOMAN, AND THE
IRRATIONAL FEMININE IN *JANE EYRE* AND *WIDE SARGASSO SEA***

by

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“Stop looking at her in phases, you must understand she is always full. Even on nights when she hides in plain sight you must not be afraid to acknowledge her

darkness.”—H.D. Johnson

“In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards[...]The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage and gazed wildly at her visitors[...]Mrs. Poole advanced[...]‘One never knows what [weapons] she has, sir: she is so cunning: it is not in mortal discretion to fathom her craft’” (Brontë 368). This is how we are introduced to Bertha Rochester, Charlotte Brontë’s madwoman in the attic and the first wife of Edward Rochester, the romantic hero of *Jane Eyre* (1846). This is as detailed a picture of Bertha as Brontë gives, and the only portrait of her from Jane’s eyes, as opposed to Rochester’s multiple descriptions of her as “a demon” and as “bad, mad, and embruted,” (367). The lack of interiority given to this character in Brontë’s novel was made up for by Jean Rhys in her 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which narrates the life of Antoinette Cosway (as she was known before Rochester renames her), from her childhood in the Caribbean, through her arranged marriage to Rochester and eventual fate as a madwoman locked in Thornfield Hall’s attic. Though more than a century stretches between the publication of the two novels, they are naturally paired together and often examined side by side. While the texts are frequently read in terms of the differences they reveal in each other, their similarities are often taken for granted, resulting in a missed recognition of the collective feminine mythology that unites the two heroines. Jane and Antoinette must both navigate the construction of their own selfhood in the face of societal isolation, and the possessive love—and loss—of Edward Rochester. Both women

must construct her own individuality despite the masculine mode of the time, resulting in separate, but overlapping journeys of feminine self-transformation.

Jane Eyre, a classic Victorian bildungsroman centers around the first-person narrative of orphaned Jane, which takes her from a rebellious and neglected ten-year-old, to a solemn, self-respecting governess at Thornfield Hall where she meets Edward Rochester, the provocative yet jaded master of the house. The isolation that Jane navigates and identifies with throughout the novel is complicated by the romantic and spiritual bond that grows between she and Rochester. The inevitable Victorian marriage plot is initially postponed by the discovery of Rochester's skeleton in the closet: a mad first wife in the attic. Her presence is felt throughout Jane's time at Thornfield, but she is only revealed once Jane and Rochester's wedding is interrupted with claims of bigamy.

Bertha's existence is hinted at when Jane first tours Thornfield; the caretaker Mrs. Fairfax says of the third floor—the attic—that, “if there were a ghost at Thornfield Hall, this would be its haunt” (131), and Jane senses throughout the novel “that there was a mystery at Thornfield; and that from participation in that mystery I was purposely excluded” (209). But Jane is not excluded by the mystery herself; Bertha makes herself known to Jane through her laughter, which Jane initially describes as “the last sound I expected to hear in so still a region...It was a curious laugh; distinct, formal, mirthless[...]It passed off in a clamorous peal that seemed to wake an echo in every lonely chamber” (132). Bertha's “goblin laughter” continues to be the only signifier of her presence, and

often occurs just before significant, violent events.¹ The night before Jane and Rochester's wedding, Bertha enters Jane's room and meets her face to face for the first time, and takes Jane's veil before "[throwing] it over her own head, and [turning] to the mirror" before she "rent it in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trampled on them" (356). Jane sees her clearly, but only in the candlelight of Bertha's flame and "the dark oblong glass" of the mirror. She makes her presence known, but only at night, remaining hidden and masked by the necessity of her character's mystery.

This mystery carries throughout the rest of the novel, at least where Bertha is concerned. She is revealed as Rochester's wife, the wedding between Jane and Rochester is cancelled, and the narrative progresses following Jane, whose story takes her away from Thornfield for the majority of the final third of the novel. The last we hear of Bertha is when Jane returns to Thornfield near the end and is told that Bertha set the house on fire and jumped from the third story, leaving Thornfield in ruins and Rochester mostly blind. She is both the sacrifice and the destruction of Rochester's empire, and we know little about her, mainly because *Jane Eyre* is not her story.

Wide Sargasso Sea, however, is her story. Bertha's narrative begins with Antoinette Cosway at home in the Caribbean, where, as a white Creole, she is automatically isolated "socially from the Caribbean black population and epistemologically from the European white population" (Griffith 223). The daughter of a mother who went "mad" and married an Englishman, Mr. Mason,

¹ Jane hears "a demoniac laugh—low, suppressed, and deep—uttered, as it seemed, at the very keyhole of my chamber door" right before Jane sees smoke and finds Rochester's bed on fire (184).

her narrative begins already defined by highs and lows, and societal expectations that she and her family will never live up to. We meet Antoinette when she is a child—as we do with Jane—before she becomes Rochester’s “Bertha.” At this point, her world and her island, where “[e]verything was brightness, or dark” (Rhys 52) is familiar and safe to her. Upon waking from a nightmare in which “[s]omeone who hated me was with me, out of sight,” she comforts herself by noticing “the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. I am safe. I am safe from strangers” (24). But she is not safe from strangers, as she soon discovers when she is married off to young Rochester, who is visiting the colonies from England.

Unlike Antoinette, Rochester does not find comfort in the wildness of her home, and cannot adjust to the island where “[e]verything is too much [...] too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger” (63). The woman—Antoinette—is a stranger, and he is a stranger to her. We are not privy to Antoinette’s initial impressions of Rochester, for their marriage begins just as Rochester’s first person narrative begins, which occupies the entire middle—part two—of the novel. His narration highlights the distance he feels from England, the island itself, and Antoinette, as he remarks from the very beginning how “she never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, dark, alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either [...] did I notice it before and refuse to admit what I saw? Not that I had time to notice

anything. I was married a month after I arrived in Jamaica” (61). What begins as the awkward strangeness of an arranged marriage mutates quickly into a discomfort that permeates the space of the novel and the space between them. Like Antoinette’s family garden, which “was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible” but where “a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell,” there is a sense that something is already dead and gone in their relationship, even as it is first freshly blossoming (17). The overwhelming sensory and sensual nature of Antoinette and the land she is from invade the restrained, British sensibilities to which Rochester is accustomed. His perception of his wife becomes so warped that he stops calling her Antoinette altogether and renames her Bertha, the same name as her mad mother, his justification being, “I think of you as Bertha” (122). The tension between them builds as Antoinette’s melancholy and Rochester’s hatred feed each other and grow together from Jamaica to England. When the story returns to Antoinette’s narrative in the final section, she is locked in the attic of Thornfield Hall, where we find her again in *Jane Eyre*—though she herself does not know where exactly she is. The novel ends just before what we know from *Jane Eyre* will be the fire that destroys Thornfield and the madwoman’s suicide. Antoinette walks down the third floor hallway with a lit candle; she has just dreamt of jumping into the sky while Thornfield Hall burns, and she says “[n]ow at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (171).

Indeed, Antoinette Cosway, Bertha Rochester—the secret of Thornfield, the first wife, the fire-starter, the other woman—is as much a mystery to literary

critics and scholars as she is to Jane and the other occupants of *Jane Eyre*. In their pivotal book *The Madwoman in the Attic: Women Writers and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar elaborate on the significance of Bertha as the madwoman, a character and an archetype that bears enough symbolic weight to carry the title of the entire book. In the madwoman's feature chapter, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: *Jane Eyre*," they famously argue that "Bertha [...] is Jane's truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead" (Gilbert and Gubar 360). In Gilbert and Gubar's analysis, Bertha is the shadow side, the "dark double" of Jane, an aspect of the unconscious instead of a mere pawn in the Victorian marriage plot or a scapegoat of the animalistic "other." Bertha becomes a symbolic representation and, like most madwomen, she represents everything women are *not* supposed to be: angry, sexual, violent, and unapologetically obvious about it. She consummated her marriage with Rochester and literally set his bed ablaze (Jane is still sexually inexperienced). She physically attacks Rochester (adult Jane is consistently passive). She rips the wedding veil in two (Jane initially went along with her own marriage plot), and, of course, Bertha faces death head on, literally leaping into the flames, a prospect which has been a silent threat to Jane ever since the schoolmaster, Mr. Brocklehurst, asks her in chapter four, "do you know where the wicked go after death?" (Brontë 37). Thus, Gilbert and Gubar assert that she is the embodiment of Jane's unconscious, so that "what Bertha now *does* [...] is what Jane wants to do" (359).

The mirroring aspect and the overall connection between the two characters is clear, but Gilbert and Gubar read them in terms of Jane's narrative alone. They privilege Jane's side of the doubling dynamic, explaining that "Jane's profound desire to destroy Thornfield, the symbol of Rochester's mastery and of her own servitude, will be acted out by Bertha, who burns down the house and destroys *herself* in the process as if she were an agent of Jane's desire as well as her own" (Gilbert and Gubar 360). They ignore the fact that "doubling" surrounds two characters, both of whom are affected by the dynamic. Bertha is interpreted as having agency in the text only as she is connected to Jane; she is "an agent of Jane's will *as well as her own*." The "as well" is glossed over as a given, if not an afterthought, abandoning the opportunity to further ask what, indeed, is the will of the madwoman? One answer lies in an aspect of the text that Gilbert and Gubar only touch on briefly.

Bertha's presence throughout *Jane Eyre* often serves as a literal wake-up-call for Jane. Her nocturnal presence begs Jane to see what is being hidden from her, and what her eventual fate could be should she choose to blindly trust Rochester: a ripped veil, a bed on fire, a life trapped in an attic. Bertha is the only *character* that attempts to awaken Jane and guide her to the truth, but she is not the only figure in the text that does so. The moon also consistently watches over Jane, appearing and revealing the shadows of Thornfield Hall.

The lunar imagery that Brontë weaves throughout the text comes and goes quietly and in cycles, much like the moon itself. Gilbert and Gubar acknowledge the lunar presence in the text, mentioning that her pilgrimage away from

Thornfield in the later part of the novel “is signaled, like many other events in the novel, by the rising of the moon.” They describe the moon as a symbol which “has its ambiguities, just as Jane’s own personality does,” and which “has elicited from her an act as violent and self-assertive as Bertha’s” (Gilbert and Gubar 363). The moon’s presence is a symbol of transformation for Jane, but Bertha is only mentioned as a wild, “self-assertive” counterpart. Gilbert and Gubar do not—indeed, nor do other critics—examine the ways that the moon consistently mirrors Bertha’s presence in *Jane Eyre* as well as Antoinette’s in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. They establish the doubling effect between Antoinette and Jane and acknowledge the moon as a reflection of Jane’s personal transformation, but they do not bring the two ideas together.

Instead of reading Bertha a mere symbolic aspect of *Jane Eyre*, both novels and both characters can be read in terms of a larger mythology of feminine transformation. *Wide Sargasso Sea* transforms Bertha into Antoinette, illuminating her as a character with her own background, her own interiority, and a personal transformation that, while much darker, parallels Jane’s personal transformation in *Jane Eyre*. Antoinette’s story is not simply the other side of Brontë’s narrative. Instead, it is part of an extended, collective narrative in which both women rescue and reclaim their feminine essence from the reductive lens of a masculine idealism. In her introduction to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Edwidge Danticat concludes by expressing the desire for a narrative that “open[s] up yet another portal into these incredibly intertwined worlds” and “brings our two headstrong and ultimately powerful heroines together on their own imaginary sea”

(Danticat 11). This analysis is that imaginary sea. And the lunar imagery is our compass.

The Madwoman in the Sky: The Irrational Feminine

The lunar symbolism in *Jane Eyre* cannot be properly addressed without an understanding of lunar symbolism in general, and its traditional representation concerning women and insanity. In *Women and Madness* (1973), psychotherapist Phyllis Chesler also writes about madwomen, not in terms of specific literary texts, but in terms of the mythological archetypes that so often inspire them. Her analysis of female madness is built on a foundation of traditional goddess lore, establishing key archetypes of the female psyche and arguing that “[m]ad women in our culture experience certain specific transformations of self, or incorporate the meaning of certain heroines” (26). In her introduction, before any modern concepts of madness are introduced, she narrates how “Artemis [...] had Demeter consecrate her to the moon, so that no matter how far she’d have to wander, she would never forget, never betray her origins” (Chesler xviii). Artemis, the Greek goddess traditionally associated with childbirth, the hunt, and, yes, the moon, is the only one of Demeter’s daughters who never marries, instead becoming a wanderer and creating her own tribe of women, Chesler claims. She is consecrated to the moon, establishing its role as a connection to the matriarchal goddess, in this case Demeter, that can neither be broken nor betrayed, no matter what paths the wandering heroine takes; she is free to roam as she likes, as long as she does not forget her essence.

In *Jane Eyre*, the moon's powerful presence watches over Jane in the same protective, matriarchal fashion, often showing up during pivotal scenes of change or decision. In the scene where Jane first meets Rochester (though she does not yet know it is him), she wanders down the road from Thornfield to deliver a letter, while "[o]n the hilltop above [her] sat the rising moon; pale yet as a cloud, but brightening momentarily" (138). Only a few paragraphs later, Rochester's horse slips on the icy causeway, and Jane helps the wounded gentleman back on his horse. The narrative addresses the moon's presence twice more in the scene, both times reflecting—literally—how Jane relates to Rochester. She is able to confidently approach and assist him because "The moon was waxing bright: I could see him plainly" (140). The moon's illumination allows her to see clearly what was once in shadow, what was once unknown, foreshadowing the proposal scene later in the novel, in which the skeptical Jane demands, "Mr. Rochester, let me look at your face: turn to the moonlight [...] I want to read your countenance—turn!" (320). The moon bestows Jane with clarity and confidence in situations where she might not have it otherwise, such as being alone on a dark road with a strange man, or receiving a marriage proposal from her wealthy older boss. As Jane assures Rochester, "I am not at all afraid of being out late when it is moonlight" (141).

But while the moon illuminates, it also casts shadows, highlighting and representing the unspoken secrets of Thornfield, not the least of which is Bertha/Antoinette. In Jane and Rochester's first meeting, their attention is drawn to "Thornfield Hall, on which the moon cast a hoary gleam, bringing it out

distinct and pale from the woods that, by contrast with the western sky, now seemed one mass of shadow” (141). The moon illuminates Thornfield, but the “mass of shadow” that the woods become represents something hidden in the background of the house, something neither the reader nor Jane sees. This imagery repeats toward the novel’s climax, when, after tentatively accepting his marriage proposal, Jane the narrator remarks, “But what had befallen the night? The moon was not yet set, and we were all in shadow: I could scarcely see my master’s face, near as it was” (321). Something still isn’t right; the moon’s light casts Rochester in shadow so Jane can’t see his face. The moon has not settled, because neither has Rochester’s past. Neither has Bertha.

Bertha becomes the secret that the moon subtly and stubbornly holds over the text, eclipsing each scene with the hidden knowledge that someone important is overlooked. In this sense, the moon functions as a double for Bertha in the same way that Bertha does for Jane, its light offering her clarity, while its shadows warn that Rochester has been deceitful, and is not all that he seems. When Bertha attacks her visiting half-brother, Mr. Mason, in the middle of the night, it is not the attack that initially awakens Jane, but the moon:

When the moon, which was full and bright [...] came in her course to that space in the sky opposite my casement and looked in at me through the unveiled panes, her glorious gaze roused me. Awakening in the dead of night, I opened my eyes on her disk—silver-white and crystal clear. It was beautiful, but too solemn; I half rose and stretched my arm to draw the curtain.

Good God! What a cry! (259)

The moonlight creeps through the window just as Bertha creeps into both Rochester's and Jane's rooms. The madwoman may be most active at night, but the moon is the nocturnal, feminine entity that truly rouses Jane. When she initially sees the moon's "glorious gaze," she personifies it with the pronoun "her," unquestioningly resonating with its femininity. But something about the feminine light is "too solemn," and the "her" quickly becomes an "it"; she stretches to draw the curtain, inadvertently shielding herself from the knowledge of Bertha that the moon has come to represent. Once the house has settled down again and the sounds from the attic have stopped, "the moon declined: she was about to set" (262); the moon sets as the light comes back up, and so does Bertha, both nocturnal figures having made themselves known to Jane.

The moon appears for Jane as both a guide and a warning, and its parallel appearance with Bertha acts as a mirror between the experiences of the two women. Bertha's nighttime antics are a warning to Jane, not just that Rochester is already married, but that he is more than capable of hurting a woman he claimed to care for. The moon's presence tells Jane, "be careful, there are shadows here you have not seen," and Bertha's presence tells Jane, "be careful, or you too may become just a shadow like me." But the moon does not only represent the literal shadows in the text and secrets of the plot. It becomes an overarching symbol for the unknowable, the otherworldly, and the irrational, and, more importantly, a level of comfort with the irrational that becomes a key characteristic of both heroines.

Rochester paints both Jane and Antoinette as strange and otherworldly. Antoinette's otherworldliness stems from her exotic island origins and natural sensuality, while he sees Jane as small, elfish and strange. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester constructs Antoinette's ethereal otherness through the exoticness of the island. The language of the natural world, including the moon and moonlight, figure for him a mysterious, inaccessible femininity. The nature of the island is entirely strange and too much for him, yet he is as bewitched by it as he is frightened:

We watched the sky and the distant sea on fire—all colours were in that fire and the huge clouds fringed and shot with flame. But I soon tired of the display. I was waiting for the scent of the flowers by the river—they opened when darkness came and it came quickly. Not night or darkness as I knew it but night with blazing stars, an alien moon—night full of strange noises. Still night, not day. (80)

Rochester creates a dichotomy between the fire and colors of the sea, and the soft mysteriousness of the flowers that open at night. Here, flowers as symbols of women and femininity are transformed; these strange flowers, which unfold not under the sun but under the moon, represent an aspect of the feminine that is hidden and exotic to Rochester. He is seduced by the unfamiliar; the night sky is not the one he knows. In England, there are strange noises, bright stars—and an “alien moon.” Looking at the moon as a symbol of the feminine, as discussed earlier, we see Rochester identifying a strange, foreign aspect of the feminine in

its alienness and its arrival alongside the nocturnal flowers. The flowers are held up as a symbol of untouched, mysterious femininity:

I went very early to the bathing pool and stayed there for hours, unwilling to leave the river, the trees shading it, the flowers that open at night. They were tightly shut, drooping, sheltering from the sun under their thick leaves. It was a beautiful place—wild, untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I'd find myself thinking, "what I see is nothing—I want what it *hides*—that is not nothing." (79)

The flowers are part of this "wild, untouched" place, and yet the virginal mysteries he projects onto their "tightly shut" blossoms conflicts with this wildness, bestowing it with "an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness." The hunger and emphasis of "I want what it *hides*" reveals both his fascination and frustration with a sensuality that is not meant for him. As an extension of the island, as Rochester sees her, Antoinette is inherently ensconced in the secrets that the flowers hold, leaving Rochester feeling alienated from both.

We see Rochester's relationship with Antoinette through his interaction with the flowers, as he is simultaneously seduced by their wild sensuality and frustrated by his distance from it. He notices, "There were two pink roses [...]. One was full blown and as I touched it the petals dropped" (78), further emphasizing his anxiety surrounding a feminine sensuality that will wilt as soon as it is corrupted by his touch. Through moments like this, it becomes evident how the young, frustrated Rochester "comes to despise Bertha's very

geographical origin, its lush, tropical refulgence being associated with her sexual personality” (Rigney 23). The issue is not, however, as Rigney states, with her sexual personality per se, but rather with what Rochester perceives as an exotic sexual essence that is *inaccessible* to him as a British man. His frustration and eventual hatred toward Antoinette is then not a simple function of ignorance or sexual uptightness, but a result of his inability to understand, and perhaps most significantly, to experience this idealistically sensual femininity he has constructed.

Rochester must come to terms with the fact that he can never know what secrets the island flowers hold, he can never access Antoinette’s wild sensuality without leaving his fingerprints and changing its essence. In a revealing moment, one of the flowers brushes his cheek and he “remember [s] picking some for her one day. ‘ They are like you,’ I told her. Now I stopped, broke a spray off and trampled it into the mud” (90). What used to be a romantic, intriguing association between woman and flower is now an association that provokes anger. This time, instead of giving her the flower, placing an image of herself in her own hands, he tramples it in the mud. He can never fully access the interiority of his wife, so he attempts to destroy it by creating his own version. The mad version. As he and Antoinette are leaving the Caribbean for England, she is not only Bertha, she is a “mad girl”—the first blossom of the “madwoman in the attic.” In one of the last few pages we read of Rochester’s part of the narrative, we see him playing with a warped sympathy, weaving her new, mad identity as he goes:

She said she loved this place. This is the last she'll see of it. I'll watch for one tear, one human tear. Not that blank hating moonstruck face. I'll listen...If she says good-bye perhaps adieu. *Adieu*—like those old-time songs she sang. Always *adieu* (and all songs say it). If she too says it, or weeps, I'll take her in my arms, my lunatic. She's mad but *mine, mine*. What will I care for gods or devils or for Fate itself. If she smiles or weeps or both. *For me*. Antoinette—I can be gentle too. Hide your face. Hide yourself but in my arms. You'll soon see how gentle. My lunatic. My mad girl. (150)

There is gentleness—he uses the word “gentle” twice—in his words, and an apparent attempt at an empathy that is absent in most of the story. The opening sentence, “she said she loved this place,” establishes a train of thought that takes into account Antoinette’s perspective—*she said*. The sentence acknowledges that she has a voice, that she has spoken, that she has expressed a feeling and thought. The sentence could have just as easily read, “she loved this place,” which is how most of Rochester’s reflections on Antoinette are expressed—as a statement of fact assumed to be true, yet hardly attributed to or acknowledging her own agency or subjectivity. The simple inclusion of “She said” not affirms that it is *her* thought and experience, but also suggests that—low-and-behold—he is capable of listening to her and capable of *remembering* what she has said.

The passage continues with a clear focus on Antoinette’s experience. The acknowledgement that “This is the last she’ll see of it” hints at a restrained sympathy for the girl who will never see her beloved land again. Yet there is also

an unmistakable cruelty imbedded in the pity he expresses for his wife. Besides the glaring fact that he is responsible for taking her away from her home, there is also a perverse, almost voyeuristic handling of her sadness that builds throughout the passage. He says, “I’ll watch for one tear, one human tear,” which is both a promise of attentiveness, but also a fixation on her pain; the specification of “human tear,” simultaneously acknowledges her humanity and also assumes that some of her tears are *not* human, that some aspects of *her*—“that blank, hating, moonstruck face”—is not human either.

The syntax of, “I’ll listen...If she says goodbye perhaps adieu. Adieu—like those old time songs she sang. Always *adieu* (and all songs say it)” is particularly curious. Again, the opening assertion of “I’ll listen” would suggest an openness and inquisitiveness toward his temperamental wife, but the pause of the ellipsis (included in the original text) suggests a “listening” pause, that gives him access not to her words or “adieux” as he suggests, but to more of his own thinking. He says, “I’ll listen”—insert ellipsis: the narrative is suspended, he/we are ‘listening—the narrative continues, still informed by *his* perceptions, and not her words. Rochester is focused on Antoinette’s moods and reactions, but with his attention, he also projects his own speculations of what she will say. He does not say “I’ll listen, and if she weeps I’ll take her into my arms.” He already knows what he will listen for, and constructs himself as the Comforting Protector based on the fantasy of what he expects she will say, which is the fantasy of Sad—not angry—Antoinette, singing old songs in French like he has seen her do.

It is the language of possession that contributes both to the tone of sympathy and to the lurking sense of fetishization in the passage. Arguably, one of the most striking sections is the climactic declaration of, “I’ll take her into my arms, *my lunatic*². She’s mad but she’s mine. What will I care for gods or devils or for Fate itself. If she smiles or weeps or both. *For me*.” This section is a primary example of the way affection and violence intertwine in the passage as a whole. The language itself divides the two aspects: the passionate, romantic rhetoric with which he plans to take her in his arms, the declaration that “she’s mine,” the idealistic hyperbole of “What will I care for gods or devils...” And yet each of these sentiments also suggest violent possession and entitlement, alongside the obvious self-interest of “*For me*,” “My lunatic,” and later in the passage, “My mad girl.” His affection is eclipsed by this possessive objectification, and the violence of the objectification is colored by the sentimentality of his rhetoric.

The mysteries that the flowers seem to hide from him become the mysteries of a woman whose interiority he can never fully access, thus he creates Bertha, a version of her that he *can* access and that is solely his. She becomes “my mad girl,” the “mad” signifying the foreignness and secrets of a closed flower, and the “my” establishing his determination to possess her. Madness is the image of Antoinette that he constructs when he considers sensual femininity in its extreme form—the flowers at night, when they are finally open. Constructing her as the “mad girl” is the only way he can possess her wildness without corrupting it; because of her untamable, alien femininity, she is mad, and because she is mad,

²Emphasis added.

she has no interiority, and can be his. It is arguably here that Rochester creates the madwoman in the attic: a vision of a femininity that is wild and sad, even as she remains trapped in the confines of her master's attic—of her master's mind.

But when Rochester touched the flower petal and it drooped, there were “two pink roses on the table” and only “[o]ne was full blown.” There are two wives, and two women; only Antoinette blossoms first. Jane is not Rochester's mad girl, but she is on multiple occasions referred to as a bird, a fairy, and an elf. After their first chance meeting on the road, he remarks to her that “you have rather the look of another world [...] When you came on me in Hay Lane last night, I thought unaccountably of fairy tales, and had half a mind to demand whether you had bewitched my horse: I am not sure yet” (Brontë 152). He immediately perceives her as a sort of fairy tale creature, even after meeting her and identifying her as the new governess, he is still “not sure yet,” what sort of non-human capabilities she may have. After Jane returns from visiting her dying aunt, having been gone, like the moon, for a whole month, he teases her with “Good angels be my guard! She comes from the other world [...] and tells me so when she meets me here in the gloaming! If I dared, I'd touch you, to see if you are substance or shadow, you elf!” (308). Rochester sees Jane as ethereal and otherworldly, the addition of “If I dared, I'd touch you” recalling the image of the closed rose. But unlike Antoinette, there is nothing frightening to him about Jane; even as he calls her an elf and teases her about bewitching his horse, he does so with the language of European fairy tales, familiar and safe even in their otherness. So while, as Gilbert and Gubar mention, “Bertha's “goblin

appearance”—“half dream, half reality”...recalls the lover’s epithets for Jane: “malicious elf,” “sprite,” “changeling” (361), he finds Antoinette’s mysteriousness frightening and truly inaccessible. Jane is a mystery to him like Antoinette, but it is only her role as governess that makes her inaccessible, not the innate alien femininity that is ascribed to Antoinette.

Rochester’s construction of femininity as otherworldly is not an isolated character movement, or a dismissible assertion of the masculine ego. His eventual hatred of Antoinette and his fascination with Jane both stem from the patriarchal mode of thought that ensures, “[m]en, politics, science—the rational mode itself—does not consult or is not in touch with the irrational, i.e., with the events of the unconscious, or with the meaning of collective history” (Chesler 26). Rochester perceives the island’s wildness and Antoinette’s femininity as forces purposely working against him, confessing to her that, “I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side.” Antoinette’s response, in a way, illustrates the entire conflict between them: “It is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. That is why you are afraid of it, because it is something else” (Rhys 117). This is the tragedy of their relationship, that the cause of his hatred for her, the secrets that the island and flowers have been concealing from him, “[have] nothing to do with either of [them].” He reads the very nature of the flowers and the moon, of the Earth itself, as personal, and concludes that that which is unfamiliar and inaccessible to him is his “enemy.” Thus, Antoinette is a “mad girl” because there is no other way to construct that which he does not understand. The very notion that her land, her songs, her flowers, existed before he arrived

and do not exist for him is, for him, a certain madness. He is not comfortable with the feminine mode of ambiguity; as Christophine, Antoinette's friend and old family servant tells her, "[t]his man not a bad man...but he hear so many stories he don't know what to believe" (103).

What both Antoinette and Jane hear from Rochester, however, shapes not only what they believe, but what they eventually do. Once Antoinette realizes that she has permanently become "Bertha" to Rochester, the prospect of a happy marriage becomes obsolete. In a half-drunk conversation during Rochester's section of the narrative, she speaks to him directly of his manipulation and injustice:

'Justice,' she said. 'I've heard that word. It's a cold word. I tried it out [...] There is no justice.' She drank more rum and went on, 'My mother whom you talk about, what justice did she have? My mother sitting in the rocking chair speaking about dead horses and dead grooms and a black devil kissing her sad mouth. Like you kissed mine,' she said.

'I'll open the window and let a little air in,' I said.

'It will let the night in too,' she said, 'and the moon and the scent of those flowers you dislike so much.'

When I turned from the window she was drinking again.

'Bertha,' I said.

'Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name.' (133)

Antoinette is not seduced by the rational concept of justice. She has heard the word, and it is “cold,” in its inherent claims of neutrality and fairness. She knows “there is no justice,” using not theoretical evidence, but the experience of her own mother’s madness and cruel fate as a reference. The phrases “whom you talk about” and “like you kissed mine,” show the relevance between her mother’s madness and her current relationship with Rochester, and her awareness of the way he uses her mother’s madness to shape his projection of her own insanity³. The matter-of-fact warning she gives, that opening the window will “let the night in” along with the moon and flowers that he hates, establishes the potency and power of these natural symbols. He hates them, but they will always be there at night, just as his attempts to hide and forget her in *Jane Eyre* fail to suppress her nocturnal activity. She solidifies this warning by naming his manipulation, stating upfront her true identity and revealing his intention of “trying to make [her] into someone else, calling [her] by another name.” Despite Rochester’s earlier claim, “[n]othing that I told her influenced her at all” (85), it becomes clear in this moment that not only do his words have a significant influence on her, but she recognizes their manipulation. She knows she is no longer Antoinette, his wife, but Bertha, his madwoman, and she knows from her mother’s example, that once she becomes “mad” in his eyes, there is no way to go back.

Although Jane is not Rochester’s madwoman, it is her empathy for Bertha’s condition and situation that allows her to question her own relationship with Rochester. After the madwoman in the attic is finally revealed, Rochester’s

³ In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester proclaims, “Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother [...] was both a madwoman and a drunkard!” (366).

hatred for his former wife shows her the real shadows that the moon and Bertha have reflected all along.

“Sir,” I interrupted him, “you are inexorable for that unfortunate lady: you speak of her with hate—with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel—she cannot help being mad.”

“Jane, my little darling (so I will call you, for so you are), you don’t know what you are talking about [...] If you were mad, do you think I should hate you?”

“I do indeed, sir.” (Brontë 380)

Though he uses the endearment, “my little darling,” he does so in the same possessive mode with which he calls Antoinette “my mad girl” in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Whether Jane wishes to be his “little darling” or not is irrelevant, because he has declared it so: “so I will call you, for so you are.” He constructs an image of Jane to suit his liking, and he does so with a logical tone that marks him unreceptive to anything more nuanced than “so you are.” Jane’s simple, affirmative response to the flustered question “if you were mad, do you think I should hate you?” reveals not only her recognition of his cruelty to Bertha, but her identification with his victim, as she sees that she might just as easily be in Bertha’s place.

Even as he tries to reassure Jane of his unconditional love for her, his language carries the same violence and possessiveness that it does when referring to Antoinette, exclaiming, “Jane! Will you hear reason? [...] because, if you won’t, I’ll try violence” (381). He uses the war-like concepts of “reason” and

“violence” as his modes of persuasion, further conveying both a lack of sympathy and an unwillingness to acknowledge her personal agency. In this pivotal moment, in which Jane tells him “I must part with you for my whole life: I must begin a new existence among strange faces and strange scenes,” his response is “I pass over the madness about parting from me. You mean you must become a part of me” (383). He sees her need to part from him and her desire for “strange faces and strange scenes,”—perhaps an island where the flowers bloom at night—as irrational, as nonsensical. The parts of Jane’s thoughts and dreams that do not involve him—that, in this case, involve an entire life without him—he automatically perceives as “madness,” like he does with Antoinette. In both texts, the concept of a feminine subjectivity that is not intended for male consumption becomes nothing short of madness when viewed, as Rochester can only help but do, through a “rational,” masculine mode. Even Jane, who does not become a mad girl in his eyes, is still accused of irrationality when she asserts her intention to leave him; he takes her words and twists them to convey what he wants to hear, so that instead of “parting from [him]” she will “become a part of [him].” Thus, it is not the explicit label of madness or madwoman per se that he ascribes to the feminine, but a mysteriousness and incomprehensibility of meaning that drives him to possess even Jane, whom it seems he truly loves.

But the hatred he shows toward his first wife and his blind insistence on marrying Jane allows her to recognize the ways she has internalized the girl he saw in her. She states, “I looked at my love: that feeling which was my master’s—which he had created,” paradoxically identifying her own feelings of

love as her master's creation; her romantic feelings are his feelings, turned inward and projected back at him. Jane's realization that "Mr. Rochester was not to me what he had been; for he was not what I had thought him" (371), allows her to see her misperceptions, but it also signifies a renewed acknowledgment of her own interiority. The admission of "he was not what I had thought him," is a function of the fact that "now I thought: till now I had only [...] followed up and down where I was lead or dragged [...] but *now, I thought*" (370)⁴.

Both heroines recognize that their individual destinies have become intertwined with Rochester's vision of the future, with Antoinette as his mad wife and Jane as his elfish "little darling." Jane's ultimate transformational moment in the text, which results in her decision to leave Rochester and Thornfield Hall forever (so she thinks at the time) is catalyzed when she dreams of a mystical meeting with the moon:

...the gleam was such as the moon imparts to vapors she is about to sever.

I watched her come—watched with the strangest anticipation; as though some word of doom were to be written on her disk. She broke forth as never moon yet burst from cloud: a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure, inclining a glorious brow earthward. It gazed and gazed on me. It spoke to my spirit: immeasurably distant was the tone, yet so near, it whispered in my heart:

"My daughter, flee temptation."

"Mother, I will" (402).

⁴ Emphasis part of original text.

Here, the moon is distinctly feminine, described using female pronouns throughout, and depicted as an actual woman coming through the clouds. Unlike earlier in the novel when both the moon and the madwoman are barely detectable warnings in the night, the feminine archetype of the celestial mother; “a symbol of the matriarchal spirit and the “Great Mother of the night sky,”” as Adrienne Rich describes it (102)⁵. The moon is depicted as a character with a clear voice and an even clearer message—the message to “flee [the] temptation” of becoming trapped in a big house and an unlawful marriage. There is nothing rational about this moment in the novel. To say that a moon goddess reaches through Jane’s dream and tells her to flee does not seem a plausible plot point for our heroine’s motivation. And yet it is, because immediately after she promises, “[m]other, I will,” she leaves Thornfield, in the middle of the night. The dream context reflects the inexplicable and mysteriousness of the lunar feminine, and Jane’s obedience to its messages highlights her comfort with the unknown and irrational—a key difference between her and Rochester. The moon comes to her in the symbolic, mythological mode of the feminine, reflecting her duty to her own self worth; Jane is a wanderer, guided by the moon which reminds her not to forget or “betray her origins,” (Chesler xviii). Her origins, in this case, are both the legacy of her own independence—the girl who told Rochester, “I am no bird, and no net ensnares me”—and of a collective mythology of women unafraid to wander in the dark in order to reclaim who they are.

⁵ Adrienne Rich also incorporates Chesler’s *Women and Madness* in her discussion of matriarchal archetypes and motherhood in *Jane Eyre*.

Antoinette has already wandered in the darkness of Thornfield's attic, having transformed at the hands of Rochester from Antoinette to the madwoman. Her final, suicidal transformation at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a final attempt to retrieve her former self, as well as everything she lost when "[she] saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking glass" (162). In the attic, her only consistent companion is her caretaker, Grace Poole, and the only reminder of her past self is her red dress, which comes to symbolize everything she lost when she was taken from the island to "[t]his cardboard world [...] that has no light in it" (162). This last section of the novel takes place just after the attack on her brother, Richard Mason, which she has no memory of until Grace Poole recounts the event. Antoinette is once again made aware of the mad transformation that has been put upon her, recounting how "[h]e looked at me and spoke to me as though I were a stranger," and immediately asking Grace, "[h]ave you hidden my red dress too? If I'd been wearing that he'd have known me" (166). Her brother's devastating visit and the reminder of her red dress as the last signifier of the old Antoinette lead to a stream of associations that lead her back to old memories and her old home. She finds her red dress in the closet, and it reminds her of "the colour of fire and sunset. The colour of flamboyant flowers. 'If you are buried under a flamboyant tree,' [she] said, 'your soul is lifted up when it flowers. Everyone wants that'" (166). The colors of the dress take her away from the dark, cardboard world of the attic, back to the "fire and sunset" and "flamboyant flowers" of the island, while the notion of the soul being lifted up with the flowering of the tree symbolizes a revitalization of the

soul through death. She associates slipping under the flamboyant dress with being buried under the flamboyant tree. She does not even mention death, she simply moves straight to burial and the flowering, lifting of the soul, which “everyone wants;” an association is already built between the red dress, a return to the flowers of her homeland, and the liberation of death. This trail of associations becomes stronger through the scent of the dress, which she recognizes as,

The smell of vetivert and frangipanni, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain. I held the dress in my hand wondering if they had done the last and worst thing. If they had *changed* it when I wasn’t looking. If they had changed it and it wasn’t my dress at all—but how could they get the scent? [...] I let the dress fall on the floor, and looked from the fire to the dress and from the dress to the fire” (166-7).

The sensory memories that come back to her through the dress are corrupted by the fact that they are only memories, and that the original smells of the island were taken away from her suddenly. She worries that they (Rochester and his associates) have done with the dress what they have done with her life: changed it when she wasn’t looking.

The red dress as a symbol of the life Antoinette once had also becomes a symbol of the agency and power she once possessed; a power she eventually reclaims through fire. After throwing down the dress, “I looked at the dress on the floor and it was as if the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do. I will remember I thought. I will remember

quite soon now” (168). The essence of her femininity as it once was spreads across the attic floor, like the fire. The action of the fire imagery combines with the beauty of her old essence, establishing in her mind the former as a way to access the latter. The significance of these moments with the red dress lie not only in their eerie foreshadowing of the fire in *Jane Eyre*, but in the active transformation that occurs as Antoinette interacts with the specter of her former self.

Jane’s journey away from Thornfield starts with a dream, and so does Antoinette’s. While Jane’s vision of matriarchal, lunar guidance tells her to reclaim her independence by resisting temptation, Antoinette’s dream is a narrative of events in which she comes face to face with herself in the halls of Thornfield. As she walks down the hall with a candle, “it seemed to me that someone was following me, someone was chasing me, laughing. Sometimes I looked to the right or the left but I never looked behind me for I did not want to see that ghost of a woman who they say haunts this place” (168) the ghost that she refers to is her, of course, roaming the halls and laughing. But she does not know, because it is just a narrative she hears them tell; the madwoman is a narrative, not an individual person, and the ghost laughter she hears in the dream reflects how the narrative has been given a life of its own. She enters a room filled with red curtains and carpet⁶, then enters the hallway again where “[i]t was then that I saw her—the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her” (169). The gilt frame around the woman signifies that

⁶ Reminiscent of the Red Room that young Jane is locked in at her aunts house, and where she too is convinced of a ghostly presence.

Antoinette is looking into a mirror, making this the first time she has seen her reflection in a very long time, since watching her “looking glass” float out the window with her past self (162). Seeing her own reflection gives her both a reminder of her own individuality, and a reminder of the image other people see, of the madwoman Rochester constructed.

Even as a dream, it’s the closest glimpse of her own selfhood she has had since being in the attic, the mirror and the recognition of the woman revitalizing her sense of her own subjectivity. She drops the candle, signifying this change, which sets fire to her surroundings. She steps outside on the roof to escape the shouting coming from the house when, “I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it [...] I saw the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life in flames. I saw the chandelier and the red carpet downstairs and the bamboos and the tree ferns...” (170) The list goes on as she recounts visions of her past, of the life she knew before Rochester, and the person she was before she became Bertha. There is no figure reaching out of the moon telling her to run, but there are dozens of figures and images in the sky, compelling her to join them and reclaim the life she might have known. The tree of life in the garden that she loves so much is on fire; it has become a “flamboyant tree,” like the ones she said will lift up the soul of anyone buried underneath it. As Antoinette said, “[e]veryone wants that” (166). In this dream, she sees a way to finally lift up her soul. She takes it, and jumps. Like Jane, she wastes no time once she awakens. She immediately leaves the attic with her candle and walks down

the hall, confident that “[n]ow at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (171).

Both Jane and Antoinette liberate themselves from the roles they have thus occupied. Both women leave Thornfield to pursue other lives: Antoinette following the familiar images in the sky, and Jane setting off on her own, cold and alone, but determined to find shelter elsewhere, which she does find, in the form of her three cousins. Even though Jane eventually returns to Rochester, she never again returns to the same Thornfield Hall. Rochester is a new man, blinded as a result of Antoinette’s captivity and ultimate liberation. Without his sight, he can no longer rely on his own perceptions to know the world, and must learn to be comfortable with ambiguity and shadows, as Jane has been all along. The supernatural nature of Jane and Rochester’s reunion, in which Jane suddenly hears his voice cry out her name from miles away, is a surrender to the realm of shadows and the irrational. Naturally, when this inexplicably mystical moment occurs, “the room [is] full of moonlight” (Bronte 528).

But what of Antoinette? *Jane Eyre* tells us that she dies, jumping from the blazing battlements of Thornfield, but *Wide Sargasso Sea* keeps the outcome a mystery. Perhaps we are meant to assume that her death is her liberation, and that her soul is indeed lifted as the tree of life blooms. Or perhaps she plays a trick and survives the fire and the fall—perhaps she escaped, and is now dancing by the sea in her red dress. The narrative encourages us to find meaning in the darkness of ambiguity—to “let the night in”—recognizing that in some places, the most interesting flowers bloom only in the dark (Rhys 133).

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